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ABSTRACT

Rural public schools can be perceived as economic drains on community resources; they also can be perceived as being of inadequate quality, hence demanding more support. Educational critics, however, are questioning the notion that more is better and are recommending teaching fewer, more integrated courses, in longer time periods. In analyzing indicators of input, process, and performance, rural secondary schools are closer to these recommendations than large or urban schools. They offer fewer courses with teachers often teaching more than one content area. Teaching strategies such as cooperative learning and peer teaching are an integral part of multi-grade teaching assignments of the small, rural school. These are being recognized as good instruction, particularly for at-risk students. Despite these rural strengths, the evidence for rural schools' better outcome is not clear. One reason for such obscurity is that education is dominated by urban values and standards. To recapture the relevance of learning, a style of schooling and classroom organization is needed to actively engage students with the natural and human world around them, not just in the context of science or social studies, but as subject matter for artistic expression, mathematical analysis, astronomy, history, and reading and writing. Because of their small scale and ready access to the environment, rural schools are able to implement these activities more easily than large urban schools. Rural schools have the opportunity to be leaders in redesigning schools for the future. Includes 25 references. (ALL)

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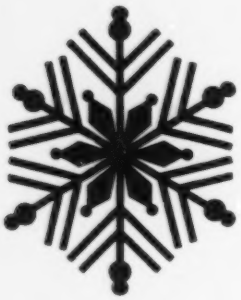
Rural Education in a Period of Transition: Are the Public Schools Up to the Task?

Paul Nachtigal*



The quality of America's public schools is increasingly open to question. Starting with *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a growing number of studies and reports have identified inadequacies in the education of our nation's youth. Such criticisms are not new to rural education. Even before the turn of the century, educational leaders were concerned about the "rural school problem." Why, through recent history, have rural schools been considered to be a problem? Are they really inferior to larger urban schools? This paper addresses three related issues. 1) How the "rural school problem" came to be defined. 2) An examination of data which compares the quality of small rural schools with larger urban schools. And, 3) how rural schools might be redesigned to be more effective as we move from an industrial society to an information/service society.

The Rural School Problem

In the beginning, education in America was rural education. In 1990, approximately three fourths of America's districts are rural, enrolling approximately one third of the nation's school children. Even though most of America was rural during the first part of the century and rural districts continue to dominate in num-

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bers, urban professionals very early gained control of the leadership of American public education, leadership which felt compelled to address the "rural school problem." By the 1890s, the National Education Association Committee of Twelve prescribed "...the consolidation of schools and transportation of pupils, expert supervision by county superintendents, taking the schools out of politics, and professionally trained teachers." "Don't underestimate the problem of school reform," Ellwood P. Cubberly wrote in 1914,

> because the rural school is today in a state of arrested development, burdened by education traditions, lacking in effective supervision, controlled largely by rural people, who, too often, do not realize either their own needs or the possibilities of rural education, and taught by teachers who, generally speaking, have but little comprehension of the rural-life problem...the task of reorganizing and redirecting rural education is difficult and will necessarily be slow (Cubberly,1914).

The urbanization of the public schools into what David Tyack called "the one-best-system" brought with it a mission and a set of quality standards which were much more appropriate for urban than rural settings (Tyack, 1974). The curriculum was designed to prepare an industrial labor force, for jobs primarily in urban areas. Quantity was synonymous with quality. Input characteristics of schools, which were easily quantifiable, were thought to represent quality. The more courses offered, the more books in the library, the greater number of specialized teachers, the better the school. This set of assumptions about school quality continues to dominate public policy, driving much of the recent reform legislation which has swept the country. More courses are being mandated in math, science and foreign language. There are pressures for a longer school day and school year.

While this system of schooling has served the larger society reasonably well over the last century, it has been at the expense of rural schools and rural communities in at least two ways. First, because bigger is considered to be better, by definition, rural schools are "second best." Even with school consolidation, which was and in many places continues to be the solution to the rural school problem, rural schools were not considered to be as good as urban schools because there was no way that they could become equally as large. Secondly, because the primary measure of school success was how well students were prepared to continue their education and

. . . public school has become one of the biggest economic drains on the resources of rural communities.

or find work in larger urban areas, rural schools served to "export" rural students. As a result the public school has become one of the biggest economic drains on the resources of rural communities.

The "rural school problem" then is different depending on one's perspective. If viewed from the perspective of the education profession, the problem is perceived to be one of inadequate quality, an issue which we will examine in more detail a bit later. If viewed from the perspective of the local community, the problem is one of being a severe drain on local resources, both human and economic, an issue which also will be revisited in more detail later. First, a few general statements are needed concerning the relationship which exists between rural schools and the context within which they operate.

The diversity of rural America is now well understood. It is diverse in its economic base, diverse in terms of geography, diverse in terms of density of population, diverse in its ethnic and racial make-up, and diverse in terms of the socio-economic status of its communities. Any discussion about the adequacy of public education must acknowledge that socio-economic status, more than any other single factor, determines the success of all students, particularly in those communities where a high percentage of students live below the poverty line. Because of the interrelationships between schools, student performance, and environmental factors, generalizing across rural schools is difficult if not impossible. For instance, a high percentage of students attending rural schools in poor and/or minority communities are clearly at-risk, while most students attending schools in what are thought of as traditional middle-America rural communities, settled by ethnic European immigrants, are likely to receive more than adequate education with the skills to succeed in whatever arena they choose.

Quality of Rural Schools

The evaluation of school quality has evolved in recent years from looking only at input standards, as discussed above, to include process standards, how well those resources are being used, and perhaps most importantly, the outcomes or performance of schools and their students. What does the data suggest concerning how well rural schools measure up in each of these areas?

Input Indicators

As suggested earlier, input indicators include such things as an adequate, well-maintained physical plant, highly qualified staff, a sufficient supply of books, materials and equipment, and a strong breadth and depth of course offerings. Rural school facilities in general are older, many having grown like topsy in response to the closing of out-lying schools and changing program emphasis. Limited resources, and a tradition of "making do" result in remodeling and adding on rather than building a new facility. A typical rural school might include a multi-story building dating back to the 30s, a new gymnasium added on here, an elementary wing attached there, and a new vocational shop built out behind the main building. More important than the age of the facility, however, is how well it is maintained.

Pride and caring for the school sends a message to the students and community that education is important. Rural schools, because they represent the largest community investment and serve as the center of community activities, are generally well cared for.

Rural schools have fewer specialized teachers, who in general have less formal education. Teachers often have three, four, or even five preparations a day, some of which are assignments in areas where they are only minimally qualified. In a study of 24 rural districts Schmuck and Schmuck (1989) found that over 80 percent of the administrators and 90 percent of the teachers interviewed had grown up very close to where they are now teaching. There are both positive and negative aspects of an employment process that results in these figures. On the one hand, an effective school is one that has a coherence around values and mission. Growing up in the area helps insures this coherence. However, a school staffed only with "home-town" type people is sure to be limiting in the exposure to new ideas, resulting in a more parochial educational experience. Rural schools will offer fewer courses at the secondary level, and provide fewer options for special need students at the elementary level.

While the above characteristics which accompany small size have over the years been used as reasons to consolidate rural schools, recent research suggests that further consolidation may not be useful. Monk and Haller, at the request of the New York State Legislature, conducted an extensive study of school size and class offerings. The study, Organizational Alternatives for Small Rural High Schools, (1986) not only considered the school size/number of class offerings issue, but looked at the number of teacher preparations and availability of classes, e.g. were classes offered more than one period a day, thus reducing schedule conflicts. The study confirmed the fact that numbers of class offerings did indeed increase as schools increased in size from 100 in high school up to 3000. It concludes:

> ...the curricular offerings of the very smallest secondary schools in New York State are seriously deficient. These deficiencies begin to appear when enrollment levels in grades 9-12 begin to fall below 400 and become more serious as enrollments fall further. Several of the deficiencies, most notable the availability of courses, accessibility to the offered courses and the degree to which teachers can specialize, become especially acute when the grade 9-12 enrollment drops below 100. It follows, then that there is very little good that can be said about attempts by the State, or anyone else, to increase enrollment levels in grades 9-12 beyond 400. The only benefit we were able to identify is the fact that variety of course offerings continues to grow beyond the 400 pupil level. But this growth of courses is highly unpredictable and does not lead systematically to the offering of a coherent, widely agreed upon curriculum.

Educational critics such as Goodlad (1984) and Boyer (1983) are being joined by others such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the American Association for the Advancement of Science in their questioning of the notion that more is better. They point out that the structure of the curriculum which packages knowledge into discrete disconnected courses, taught in 55 minute classes, may not be educationally sound if we are to educate students for the 21st century. This factory model of schooling was fine for an industrial society, but not for the emerging information age. Just acquiring the basic skills and facts is now not sufficient. Problem solving and higher order thinking skills are needed Their recommendations include teaching fewer, more integrated courses, in longer time periods. Rural secondary schools, because they offer fewer courses and because teachers often teach in more than one content area, are of necessity closer to realizing these recommendations than large schools.

At the elementary level, experts in the field are also questioning whether specialization has gone too far.

> . . . as enrollment size increased, the percentage of students actually taking such courses as chemistry, physics, or business management decreased.

Schools are now being encouraged to mainstream special need students, placing them back into regular classes in so far as possible. Teaching strategies such as cooperative learning and peer teaching, strategies that are an integral part of multi-grade teaching assignments of the one-room school, are being recognized as good instruction, particularly for students who tend to be at-risk.

Process Indicators

There is a growing consensus of what constitutes effective school characteristics in terms of the educational process. From the work of such notable educator/researchers as Ron Edmonds, John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, Sara Lightfoot and Michael Rutter, the consistent elements of educational excellence revolve around such interpersonal and institutional factors as: 1) strong positive leadership; 2) high expectations of student and teacher achievement; 3) respectful relationships among students, teachers, and administrators; 4) individualized instruction and attention; 5) an emphasis on the academic basics; 6) parental/community involvement and support; 7) fair and frequent feedback to both students and teachers on their performance (emphasizing positive reinforcement of success and progress); 8) a friendly, but businesslike, classroom and school climate; 9) a healthy balance of activities fostering the intellectual, physical, emotional, and social development of students; and 10) a tolerance for individual initiatives and for trying new approaches to learning (Boyer, 1978; Goodlad, 1984; Edmonds, 1978; Lightfoot, 1983; Rutter, 1979).

While all of the above process indicators are well within reach of rural schools, their presence or absence is very much related to the community context rather than appearing generically in all rural schools.

Strong, positive leadership. Chance and Lingren (1989) studied the aspirations and realities of rural secondary principals in the Great Plains (North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas) and found that 48.3 percent of the principals' time was spent on general managerial duties; 11.5 percent on working directly with teachers; 22.3 percent on disciplining students, and 6.8 percent on meeting with parents. They conclude "It is difficult, if not impossible, to be an instructional leader when a typical day is spent as indicated. It is especially difficult for rural principals to be instructional leaders when 48 percent of them teach and the average teaching load is 35.6 percent of the school day." Killian (1988) noted that rural principals did not play the same leadership role as urban principals. Rather, rural teachers were the initiators of change, not the principals; the unit of change for these teachers was the classroom, not the building. Support in the minds of these rural teachers required only that an administrator not impede their efforts. It should also be noted, however, that in spite of the odds, good leadership can be found in schools of all sizes and when it exists in rural schools, the impact is much greater and the rate of change much faster due to the absence of bureaucratic inertia which is found in larger institutions.

High expectations of student and teacher achievement. Expectations for students and teachers will vary widely from one type of rural community to the next. The standards for those expectations are most likely tied to the experience of the adults. If there are few professional role models and if most of the adults are first generation high school graduates, the expectations will be very different than those in a community where, because of culture or location, high percentages of adults have some college or post-high school education.

Respectful relationships, a friendly, but businesslike, classroom and school climate, and parental/community involvement and support are all easier to achieve and tend to be present in rural schools. Examining student engagement rates in two Colorado schools implementing a four-day week, Blackadar and Nachtigal (1986) found elementary students attending to their school work on average about 85 percent of the time, a very high rate compared to data from large urban schools in the project. A study of rural high schools in North Dakota (Traugh, 1984) characterized the climate as "relaxed, friendly, personal." "Parents, if called, will help" with students problems and some parents call to ask, "What can we do to help?" On the down side, and, related to the question of expectations, teachers reported "They'll (parents) knock themselves out to turn out for athletics." Academically, "mediocrity is accepted."

An emphasis on the academic basics. Barker and Gump (1964), in a five year comprehensive study of fifty-two high schools in Eastern Kansas ranging in size from 35 to 2287, found that large-school students participated in fewer classes and a more limited variety of classes than the small school students. Horn (1986), in a seven state follow-up study, found that as enrollment size increased, the percentage of students actually taking such courses as chemistry, physics or business management decreased. Why is this so when large schools offer many more courses than small schools? In small schools the lack of choice forces students to take a greater variety of courses and more basic subjects, they just have to take what is offered. In large schools, students can begin to specialize. If they like art, there are many art courses to take, often at the expense of exploring other areas or taking more years of math or science.

A healthy balance of activities. Students who are actively engaged in the total process of schooling, including participation in extra-curricular activities are also likely to have higher achievement levels. The Kansas study mentioned above found that such participation "reached a peak in high schools with enrollments between 61 and 150. The proportion of participants was 3 to 20 times greater in the small schools as in the largest school (Barker and Gump, 1964)."

Performance Indicators

Given that rural schools have both strengths and weaknesses in terms of input and process criteria, what is the evidence about how well rural schools and the students attending those schools perform? How adequately are students prepared when they leave rural schools? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are not readily available for a number of reasons. Haas (1990) suggests a couple of reasons for the thin rural education knowledge base. First, rural education is not precisely defined, there is no useful definition of what is rural. Second, knowledge is not neutral, it is value laden. The usual education knowledge base is created in a context that reflects the prevailing view that rural is at best, invisible and more realistically, unvalued.

Adding to the difficulty is the fact that procedures for measuring school and student performance are still fairly primitive. Finally, the impact of SES on student achievement and the diversity of rural America make aggregating data on student achievement almost meaningless. As a result the literature contains very disparate findings. Two kinds of data are provided as a case in point. *Beyond High School: The Experience of Rural and Urban Youth in the 1980s*, a national data file of 11,000 high school seniors in 1980, (Pollard & O'Hare, 1990) presents aggregate data broken out by "metro" and "nonmetro" student population. This data suggests a fairly gloomy picture of rural education with nonmetro students showing up second best on all measures. When examining the same kind of information at the state

level, most of which comes from the upper-Midwestern states, the findings are just the opposite. While the state level studies are more targeted than the national data and thus more useful in terms of informing policy decisions, neither are sufficiently disaggregated to permit us to tie the data to the diverse cultural contexts found in rural America. The information on the performance of rural schools is presented in three areas, student achievement, success in college and drop-out rates.

Student Achievement

The national *Beyond High School* study concludes that metro seniors were more likely to take a curriculum designed to prepare them for college. Two-fifths (42 percent) of metro seniors were enrolled in an academic or college preparatory program, compared with one-third (33 percent) of nonmetro seniors. Metro seniors were also more likely to complete a variety of advance math and science courses.

Metro seniors scored higher on a variety of tests measuring cognitive skills and abilities.

There is no attempt here to track student enrollment or persistence in post-secondary programs so these data actually tell us little about either student achievement or the adequacy of student preparation.

The studies of student achievement at the state level are generally tied to school size and initiated to either build a case for or against school consolidation. When such studies include influential SES variables, and even when they don't, they tend to confirm a positive effect of small-scale schooling on the achievement of students. For example, the University of Colorado School of Education, in cooperation with the Colorado Department of Education, conducted a study of the results of

The usual education knowledge base is created in a context that reflects the prevailing view that rural is at best, invisible and more realistically, unvalued.

standardized math and reading tests administered to 102 school districts in Colorado to grades 5, 6, 11, and 12 from 1979 to 1982. (Turner, 1985) The most significant correlation was a high negative correlation between student achievement and the size of the student population of the district, with the larger districts obtaining up to 25 percentiles less achievement than the smaller districts.

A study by Edington and Gardner (1984), conducted in cooperation with the Montana Office of Public Instruction, compared the achievement results of a series of standardized tests given to Montana students in grades 6 and 11 from 1975-1980. The researchers concluded, "Even though the significant relationships did not account for large amounts of the variances, there are trends throughout the data which lead us to believe that the students in the smaller schools, both the elementary and secondary levels, have higher scores in the cognitive domain than those in the larger schools."

Muse, Ho, and Smith (1985) conducted an extensive survey of one-room schools in the states of Nebraska, South Dakota, and Montana. The researchers followed students into high school after eighth grade graduation and concluded that students from the one-room country schools in those states were as well prepared for entrance into high school both academically and socially as were the students from the larger town and city elementary schools.

Walberg (1988), in an "expenditure and size efficiencies" study of the New Jersey public schools, concludes "Generally, it appears that the smaller the district, the higher the achievement when the SES and per-student expenditures are taken into account. Why should small districts do well? Superintendent and central staff awareness of citizen and parent preferences, the absence of bureaucratic layers and administrative complexity, teacher involvement in decision making, and close home-school relations may account for the apparent efficiency of small districts."

College Success

The Beyond High School study concludes that metro seniors were better educated by 1986; 73 percent continued their formal education after high school, compared with only 64 percent of nonmetro seniors.

One should note, however, that this study assumes that adequacy of preparation is the primary determinant of a student continuing into post-secondary education. Clearly, financial and other considerations enter into this decision. Furthermore, the study does not take into account persistence to graduation or the fact that three fourths of higher education students do not enter directly from high school nor do they complete their degree in the traditional four years.

The achievement test scores presented from the state data are generally limited to the basic subjects. One could argue that students in schools that do not offer advanced math courses, or physics, or chemistry, or two years of foreign language would not be as well prepared for college work as those who had access to such courses. In specific instances that may be true, however, if scores on the ACT tests are any measure of college preparedness, this appears to generally not be the case.

Barber and Muse (1983), in examining ACT scores of students from districts of 300 or less with those between 301 and 900, found that student performance on the ACT Exam was significantly higher in the small districts.

Sher (1988) in examining the distribution of ACT scores among the freshman class that entered the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the autumn of 1985 (the most recent year for which these data are available) found that "...the highest ACT scores were attained by graduates of the three smallest groups of schools. The 282 freshmen from the tiniest high schools (with 24 or fewer in their class) scored an average of 21.7, while an equal number of students from larger schools (with 150-199 in their class) recorded 20.8 average score. The

UNL freshmen from the largest high schools (with 250 or more in their class) averaged only 20.7 on the ACT."

In a Montana study to determine if there is a relationship between the rate of college graduation and the size of high school from which students graduate, and to examine the issue of small schools versus large schools in relation to the adequacy of academic preparation for college, Clark (1989) concluded that size of high school attended in Montana does not appear to determine students' subsequent success in college. Academically, students from the smallest high schools did just as well, and in some cases better, than students from the largest high schools.

Attending a small high school in Montana is not a handicap. It appears that students in smaller high schools obtain a more personalized education with a strong basic skills background which enables them to succeed academically in college; in fact, it may be that a strong basic skills background is the most powerful determinant of college success.

Students from the very smallest high schools remained in college and were as likely to graduate from college as were those from the largest high schools.

Dropouts

The *Beyond High School* study does not look at dropout data, however, and nationally one in every four students who enrolls in ninth grade drops out before graduation. Here the differences between rural and urban schools are dramatic. (This generalization would, again, not hold true for poor, minority rural communities, e.g. Native American reservations, rural barrios, Southern Black communities or the hollers of Appalachia.)

A 1980 Guidance Study by the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education in South Dakota reported a one year dropout rate for the public high schools of 4.8 percent or approximately 19 percent for four years. This is approximately 6 percent below the national average.

Standardization has resulted in a curriculum which, to a large extent, is dictated by statewide book adoptions in Texas and California.

The four largest schools of the state had an annual dropout rate of 9 percent while the one hundred smallest high schools had a rate of 1.7 percent or approximately 7 percent for a four year period (compared to 25 percent nationally).

Similar figures are available from Nebraska where the annual dropout rate is 7.7 percent. The two largest districts, Lincoln and Omaha account for 26 percent of all the 112,690 secondary level students enrolled in public, K-12 school systems of the state. However, these two school systems accounted for 52 percent of all dropout in Nebraska's K-12 districts. More students in the two largest school districts dropped out last year than in all the other 279 K-12 districts combined.

By contrast, there were 93 small rural K-12 systems which had no dropouts at all last year. In fact, Nebraska can boast of fifteen entire counties (all rural) in which no secondary students dropped out during 1986-87. The Class II school districts (all of which are small rural K-12 systems) have a record that is nothing short of phenomenal in this regard. For all Class II schools there were only 31 dropouts—an annual dropout rate well under 1 percent (Sher 1988).

The above studies suggest that given existing quality standards and our assessment procedures, rural schools appear to be doing pretty well. Certainly size is not necessarily the determining factor for quality. Rural schools have strengths, which if capitalized on, can be made to compensate for perceived weaknesses which result from overlaying an urban/industrial model of schooling on rural society. This brings us to the third issue. How might rural schools be redesigned to be more effective in this period of transition and beyond?

The Schools and Rural Development

Existing data on the quality of rural schools is both conflicting and inadequate. What is certain, however, is that education whether rural or urban is not good enough for the future. An education designed for an industrial society will not serve the nation in good stead as we move into the information/service society. The changes that need to be made, while painful, may hold a silver lining for rural schools and rural communities. In fact, the characteristics of the information age may, if we are sufficiently creative enough to capitalize on them, be just what is needed to bring about a more vital future for rural America.

Industrial society was characterized by specialization, standardization and centralization. It is this set of characteristics which, when played out in the education system, resulted in the belief that bigger-is-better. More specialized courses are better that fewer courses, more specialized teachers are better than fewer teachers who are generalists. Specialization has even found its way into the elementary school. The "graded" class structure replaced the multi-grade structure of the one-room country school. Now the gifted, compensatory and special need students are removed from the classroom for special programs and an increasing array of special needs continue to appear. Standardization has resulted in a curriculum which, to a large extent, is dictated by statewide book adoptions in Texas and California. Centralization has resulted in a continued push for school consolidation, removing schools from rural communities.

We are now moving into a new paradigm. The characteristics of an information society are quite different. Instead of specialists for the assembly line, generalists are needed that understand the big picture for problem solving. Standardization is giving way to diversity; centralization to decentralization. Such characteristics are much more in tune with the inherent

characteristics of small scale and rural society where generalists and entrepreneurs are common, not exceptions.

Preparing students for an information society will require the development of a "thinking curriculum," an approach to learning which is much more experiential, one that involves students in information gathering, data analysis, arriving at alternative solutions. Textbooks and workbooks, while useful, if used exclusively provide only a symbolic medium which is drained of vitality and meaning. To recapture the relevance of learning, a style of schooling and classroom organization is needed that engages students far more actively with the natural and human world around them—not just in the context of science or social studies, but as fresh subject matter for artistic expression, mathematical analysis, astronomy, history, and for reading and writing. Because of their small-scale and ready access to the environment, rural schools are able to implement such a program far more easily than large urban schools. Rural schools could lead the way in the restructuring of education. With this redesign, education on a small-scale would be seen as the best possible education, not second best.

The information society holds promise for rural communities in another very significant way. In an information society, what one does for a living and where one lives are no longer as tightly connected. If one has access to the information infrastructure, one has a choice of life style. For those who enjoy the rural life style, a growing array of job options will be available, particularly since the majority of new jobs will be created by small entrepreneurs rather than the Fortune 500.

Given this changing context, the Rural Institute of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory has been piloting a program, Rural Schools and Community Development. The program has four component parts, 1) expanding the mission of the school to embrace community development, 2) using the community as the focus of study, 3) entrepreneurship education, and 4) using the resources of the school as an incubator for new enterprises.

Expanding the Mission of the School

The public school is often the largest single enterprise in town. In many rural communities it is the last viable social service agency. There are ways to use the resources of the school to make a greater contribution to the ongoing health of the rural community. Involving school and community leadership in a discussion of ways that this might happen is the first step in restructuring the school community relationship. Expanding the mission of the school to include community development also means the nature of the student body gets redefined. The school of the future is likely to include students from early childhood to senior citizens.

Community as the Focus of Study

The kind of "thinking curriculum" needed for the 21st Century will actively connect the subject matter being studied to the background of the learners. Such a curriculum is relevant to the important issues and tasks in the lives of students. The conduct of economic surveys, writing feature length stories on local businesses which are published in the community newspaper, or collecting data for an FmHA low cost housing loan for retired persons make the learning process more powerful while developing the understanding and appreciation of how the local economy works. Providing opportunities for young people to become participating/contributing members of the community contributes to self esteem. What students learn to know they learn to love. This understanding opens up career possibilities that did not formerly exist. For at least some "getting out of town as soon as possible" is now not the only option, and returning to raise families is a new possibility.

Entrepreneurial Education

Traditionally, schools have been much more effective at teaching students to find jobs than at creating jobs. Students need entrepreneurial skills to enable them to fill the niches in the local economy identified by community studies. Conducting market surveys, developing business plans, learning simple accounting procedures are good learning experiences and skills what will last a lifetime.

Schools as Incubators

New enterprises are most vulnerable during the first two or three years of operation. Most rural communities do not have ready access to the technical assistance and resources that have been found to be useful to fledgling businesses. The resources of the school could be used to provide that assistance.

There are themes other than community or economic development around which the restructuring of rural education could begin. Economic development, however, represents the most easily understood and therefore the most saleable. The future of rural communities depends on stemming the out-migration and diversifying the economy. And, while there is no way that the public schools can do the job alone, they represent an important resource present in every rural community which must be a part of a comprehensive rural development strategy.

In summary, rural schools may have been maligned unfairly through the years. The evidence suggests that, perhaps with the exception of rare students with very particular special needs, rural children have been served quite well. With the emergence of the information society, rural schools have the opportunity to be the leaders in redesigning schools for the future. And, if we are wise enough, not only will the education of rural children be improved, the future for rural communities will be brighter as well.

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